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Presidential-Congressional Conflict in Domestic and Foreign Policy Making

Principal Investigator: Anthony Mughan

The American form of government was founded on the key principle of checks and balances. By separating powers between the president and Congress, the founding fathers hoped that each would provide a counterweight to rein in the power of the other.

Many political scientists believe this is how dynamics between the president and Congress have played out, at least on domestic issues, where presidential initiatives often encounter opposition from Congress and entrenched interest groups.

But the dynamic has not traditionally held up in the realm of foreign policy, where voters and organized groups have shown less interest in what happens. The Vietnam War led to a greater scrutiny of president foreign policy initiatives. And the Sept. 11 attacks have made the counterbalance provided by Congress even more important, as the Bush administration pursued a policy of pre-emption, unilateralism, and an invasion of Iraq.

Despite the importance of the relationship between the president and Congress, surprisingly little is known about this dynamic. Mughan hopes to develop a deeper understanding of this relationship by asking questions such as:

- What are the forces driving policy conflict between the two branches of government?
- Under what conditions is Congress more likely to assert itself against the president?
- Do the dynamics of the relationship differ in matters of foreign and domestic policy?

Mughan's hypothesis is that public opinion plays a key role in shaping executive-legislative relations, and that presidential-congressional conflict influences public perceptions of the competence of the political actors. He thinks that conflict will vary depending on the popularity of the president and congress, and that the president's success in getting legislation through Congress will boost his public standing.



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Mughan plans to test this hypothesis through a content analysis of newspaper articles covering the president and Congress in *The Washington Post* from 1988 to 2004. By using Lexis-Nexis, he is pulling about 90 news stories a month that contain the words "president" or "congress."

Each story is coded as being conflictual or non-conflictual, with the conflict identified as domestic or foreign, and economic or non-economic. Finally, to gauge the conflict's intensity, the length of the story and its location in the paper is noted, as well as the number of congresspeople who oppose the president.

The project will produce monthly conflict data for the administrations of Clinton and both Bushes, allowing for a comparison of dynamics under Democrat and Republican presidents, as well as for the second term of at least one president. The period also covers U.S. overseas involvement in the Gulf War, Somalia, Kosovo, and Iraq. The long-term goal is to match this monthly conflict data with monthly data on economic performance and presidential and congressional popularity ratings.

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